

Photo by Erik Jepsen/University Communications

Workforce Diversity Report Reveals Gains but Little Progress for Women in STEM

A new UC San Diego report examining female representation in the STEM workforce highlights both historic progress and troubling trends occurring simultaneously. Overall, it paints a lopsided picture for one of the nation's most robust and high-paying career fields when it comes to gender parity, both nationally and locally.

The UC San Diego Extension [Center for Research and Evaluation](#) analyzed the most recent publicly available data for Athena, a high-profile San Diego-based leadership advocate for women in STEM. Using U.S. Census data and other sources to better understand the state of women in STEM, the report documents progress and persistent challenges

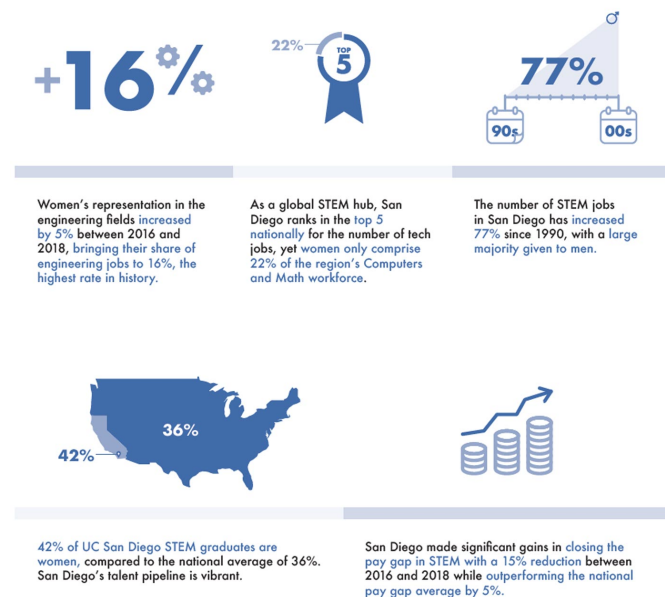
The report, Athena's Women in STEM Workforce Index 2020, reflects the nuances of measuring equity in the nation's top career field. While it touts historic gains, it also highlights concerns that the overall share of STEM jobs held by women remains woefully modest.

"For the first time in San Diego's history, our life sciences sector achieved gender equality with women now equally represented," said Holly Smithson, Athena CEO. "Meanwhile, women comprise a paltry 25% of the San Diego region's STEM workforce overall."

As a global STEM hub, San Diego provides an intriguing backdrop to study a national workforce phenomenon. The Brookings Institute reports that in recent years more than 90 percent of the country's growth in "innovation sector" jobs has occurred in just five cities. One of those is San Diego.

Among other factors that sets the region apart, UC San Diego graduates a higher number of female STEM students than the national average, and the region has outperformed the national average in attracting women to STEM. More than 4,500 women entered the local STEM workforce between 2016 and 2018.

However, despite the potential for significant growth, the numbers fail to show a meaningful shift in the hiring or retention of female STEM talent.



"We need to acknowledge that dramatic gender differences in STEM occupations persist, and investigate further to more fully understand the driving forces and solutions for these phenomena," said Georgia Kovacs, associate director of Extension's research center, who spearheaded the data analysis in this report. "We need to understand, for example, why UC San Diego graduating close to equal numbers of women and men in STEM does not translate to gender equity in the local workforce."

In some areas, San Diego County is leading the way in positive trends, Kovacs said. However, overall the region still has a long way to go.

Women now hold an equal 50 percent share of the life and physical sciences STEM jobs for the first time ever in San Diego County. This amounts to a historic breakthrough, Smithson said.

Some of the positive results could be attributed to UC San Diego's higher than average female STEM graduation rates—42 percent of UC San Diego STEM graduates are women, compared with 36 percent nationwide. Since 1990, the number of STEM jobs held by women in San Diego has increased by 96 percent. But even as the number of available STEM jobs in the region has increased, women's share of these jobs has remained almost unchanged—three out of four STEM jobs in San Diego County are held by men, just as they were in 1990.

Women's share of STEM jobs in San Diego grew just 3 percent from 22 percent in 1990 to 25 percent in 2018.

“These long-standing disparities take time to correct, but we would have expected to see better gains in a region as robust with female STEM grads as San Diego,” said Mary Walshok, the Dean of UC San Diego Extension and an enthusiastic proponent for executive and industry diversity throughout the region. “This report demonstrates that significant barriers persist, and suggests more deliberate action is needed to correct course. We're proud to work with Athena because this is truly vital work for our economic future. Diversity is our greatest strength.”

Smithson agreed saying this issue “requires a regional commitment and a set of shared values for achieving gender equity, as we seek to make our STEM hub globally competitive.”

Athena, launched and conceived by UC San Diego in 1999, is on a mission to advance 1 million women into STEM leadership positions by 2030.

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